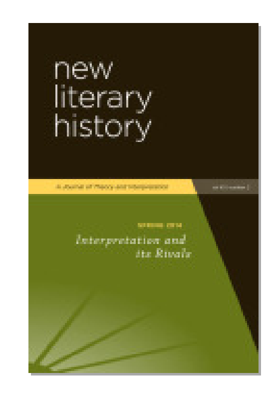


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What is interpretation? What might its rivals be? As soon as we start to answer these questions, we are already interpreting, because interpretation is nothing but thinking about what, how, when, where, and why, and articulating our reasoning in language. What opposes or rivals interpretation must therefore present itself as doing rather than thinking and articulation; that is to say, it must take some form of direct action without thinking. I understand interpretation and its rivals as an opposition between thinking and action, between *mental* activities and *physical* actions. It is necessary to make a distinction between the two, for we may run into difficulties if we confuse one with the other—which, as we shall see, is a problem with certain trends in contemporary theory. We may either lose a sense of reality by indulging in thinking and contemplation, even mistaking thinking and speaking for action in a concrete and corporeal sense; or we may plunge into catastrophic results by rushing to action without careful thinking and deliberation. Once we have set up the opposition, however, problems also arise, because both thinking and action are necessary in life and we cannot choose one at the expense of the other. Thinking without action is futile, but action without thinking is dangerous. We often face the difficult choice between the two, and on occasions we may have legitimate reasons to complain about too much thinking and interpretation. It is my argument in this essay, however, that if we look into the opposition closely, we may realize that the distinction between thinking and action, though absolutely necessary, is not a rigid dichotomy.

Thinking and speaking, *ratio* and *oratio*, as Hans-Georg Gadamer explains, define the human being as the animal of *logos*, and by thinking ahead and speaking about "something else not yet given," humans can anticipate and predict what will happen; therefore the "distinguishing feature of man," says Gadamer, "is his superiority over what is actually present, his sense of the future."[2] Such a philosophical understanding of humanity puts future-oriented thinking above action and makes interpretation absolutely essential for knowing what lies ahead and in

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depth, above or beneath what is actually present. Aristotle argues in *De interpretatione* that thinking as interpretation is concerned with "those things which are actual but also potential, whose actuality is in nature prior to their potentiality, though posterior in time."[3] Action turns potentiality into actuality, but it is "posterior in time," because it is first anticipated in thinking and interpretation. According to this Aristotelian understanding, then, humans as rational beings would think before they act and would interpret the present to anticipate the future. Of course, one may imagine the opposite—an irrational being that puts action before thinking, as I once saw expressed, surely with a sense of humor, in a self-deriding bumper sticker on a pickup truck in California, which reads: "Shoot first, think later!" In the world we live in, then, we have on the one hand the cerebral, intellectual type who puts thinking before action, and on the other the impulsive, trigger-happy type who jumps to action without much thinking. Action demands immediate, spontaneous response, while thinking and interpretation necessitate slow deliberations. As I said above, I put interpretation together with thinking as a mental act prior to action, while I regard action as a physical act that does things or causes them to change in reality.

But isn't interpretation or even speaking already an action? J. L. Austin's speech-act theory seems to consider at least some portion of language "performative," and this idea has often been appropriated in literary theory to empower anything that involves the use of language. As David Gorman observes, however, Austin set up and then *rejected* the hypothesis of a constative and performative distinction, and replaced it with another pair of concepts—locutionary and illocutionary acts. Although literary scholars tend to focus on "performative utterances" and understand Austin's insight as the idea that "all language *is* performance," they are confusing, "in a way that Austin could never have done, a necessary condition for a phenomenon with the thing itself."[4] In other words, speaking is not action per se, even if some speech acts, such as excusing, insulting, threatening, warning, or giving orders, may involve certain verbal components and induce certain actions. Perhaps the most spectacular speech act is uttered by God in Genesis 1:3, "Let there be light: and there was light." That particular performative utterance indicates a divine quality utterly denied to ordinary human speech, but ordinary human speech is precisely what Austin set out to discuss. Literary or dramatic speech, "if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy," says Austin explicitly, must be excluded for being "hollow or void," because in such cases language is used "not seriously, but in ways *parasitic* upon its normal use."[5] Austin's speech acts are certain normal uses of ordinary language, and therefore that biblical command cannot be an exemplary speech act.

Another connection between speaking and action comes from the famous Greek orator Demosthenes. When asked what constitutes the chief part of an orator, what next, and what next again, he thrice answered: *Action*. Francis Bacon, however, finds that answer fairly strange, for "that part of an orator which is but superficial, and rather the virtue of a player, should be placed so high above those other noble parts of invention."[6] Bacon deflates the theatricality of such performative utterances by making a jibe at Mahomet's command to ask the hill to come to him: "and when the hill stood still, he was never a whit abashed, but said, *If the hill will not come to Mahomet, Mahomet will go to the hill.*"[7] Mahomet is here humanized, and his command, unlike God's in Genesis, becomes an ordinary speech act in human language that fails to move mountains. In this sense, then, Bacon's essay may be said to discuss what is now known as "speech act as action," or more precisely, it presents a critique of the confusion of a speech act, such as a command, with real action such as a physical movement. You may talk dramatically and shout out whatever command you fancy, but for all "the virtue of a player," you cannot make the mountain move a fraction of an inch by your speech. The point is that thinking, speaking, and interpretation as *mental acts* are not the same as *physical action* with tangible consequences.

Though formulated differently, the idea that thinking and interpretation anticipate what lies beyond the immediately present also appears in ancient Chinese philosophy. Chinese thinkers often talk about language as pointing to something away from what is actually present, accessible only through interpretation. Mencius (371?–289 BCE), for example, maintains that "He who speaks of things near at hand but with far-reaching import is good with language."[8] Han Fei (280?–233? BCE) understands thinking as anticipating what will be in the future and interpreting what is visible in order to know what is yet invisible. The sage, he declares, "sees the smallest signs and knows what is growing, and sees the beginning and knows what the end is going to be."[9] *I Ching* or the *Book of Changes* is revered and praised for its conciseness and profundity, for it "names the small but implies the great; its import is far-reaching, its expressions are elegant, and its language is indirect but reaches the point."[10] All these statements make clear that knowledge is the interpretive capability to anticipate what is forthcoming in the future, and that language points to something hidden or indirect, away from its surface meaning. Thus interpretation becomes crucial for bringing out the "far-reaching" import, the essences, causes, principles, and deeper meanings, and for articulating these in language. With a long intellectual tradition, the Chinese generally tend to privilege thinking over action, and a phrase from the Confucian *Analects*, "think thrice

before taking action," is widely accepted as a popular expression of wisdom and a warning against hasty action.[11] Philosophical epistemology thus creates a dichotomy between future and present, essence and appearance, thinking and action, or perhaps we may say in a broad sense, interpretation and its rivals.

It was to one aspect of such a philosophical epistemology, in the area of art criticism, that Susan Sontag directed her critique in her provocative essay "Against Interpretation." Sontag started her essay by making a contrast between the "*experience* of art" and the Greek "*theory* of art" as mimesis or representation, which separates the "form" of art from its "content," and "makes content essential and form accessory."[12] The influence of the mimetic theory persists even in modern criticism, for it is always assumed that "a work of art by definition says something," and what it says needs interpretation.[13] "What the overemphasis on the idea of content entails is the perennial, never consummated project of *interpretation*," says Sontag. "And, conversely, it is the habit of approaching works of art in order to *interpret* them that sustains the fancy that there really is such a thing as the content of a work of art."[14] Separated from a form that can be directly experienced, the content of a work is assumed to lie somewhere away from the surface and the immediately accessible, and therefore it needs to be dug up by an interpretation that tries to reach a hidden essence, and to discover it at a moment in the future. Critical interpretation excavates, says Sontag, "and as it excavates, destroys; it digs 'behind' the text, to find a sub-text which is the true one."[15] Her argument displays an artistic sensibility we often find in poets and artists, well articulated, for example, in William Wordsworth's famous lines:

> Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;
> Our meddling intellect
> Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things;
> —We murder to dissect.[16]

In a way, Sontag is arguing for action against interpretation, for an experience of the immediately present or what she calls "an erotics of art" against "hermeneutics," the interpretive effort to find what lies in the depths or in the future.[17] As an exemplary public intellectual, however, Sontag realized that she could not really be against interpretation as such, and eventually she had to admit, albeit obliquely in an introductory note to her book, that the problem she was trying to attack was more complicated than she had thought. "I wrote as an enthusiast and a partisan—and with, it now seems to me, a certain naiveté," says

Sontag.[18] For some of her readers, as Carl Rollyson comments, "her position comes perilously close to admitting that she did not mean what she wrote. Her vision of writing as a provisional act, not a permanent one, has disturbed others who require from Sontag a greater degree of commitment to her ideas or a clearer repudiation of those she no longer holds."[19] And yet, Sontag's essay raised the question of the importance of direct experience and action and registered the discontent with endless thinking and interpretation.

If philosophical understanding gives thinking and interpretation a higher priority than action, it is bound to run into problems, because action is surely necessary for human development, and there are occasions where it must take precedence over thinking and interpretation. Long before Sontag, there were already complaints about too much emphasis on interpretation. "No desire is more natural than the desire for knowledge," says Michel de Montaigne, but he goes on to complain about the proliferation of approaches to knowledge, particularly the numerous laws, their obscure legal jargon and their various interpretations, which lead to confusion rather than knowledge. "There is more trouble to interpret interpretations than to interpret things, and more books on books than on any other subject: we do nothing but comment on one another."[20] Montaigne's critique of too much interpretation articulates a sense of frustration with endless debate and philosophizing without the outcome of a real solution, but Montaigne's skepticism is far from advocating action without thinking. He was not "against interpretation" as such, but he did feel impatient with the barren mental acrobatics of interpreting interpretations, writing books on books, and making comments on other comments ad infinitum.

An episode from Chinese historiography may illustrate the problem of failing to take decisive actions: the year 638 BCE, when the State of Song was at war with the State of Chu at a big river. Before the troops of Chu had crossed the river, the chief advisor told Duke Xiang of Song: "We are outnumbered by our enemies, please give order to strike now when they have not completely crossed the river." But the Duke said, "Not yet." After a while, the army of Chu had crossed the river but had not formed its battle arrays; the chief advisor urged Duke Xiang again, but the Duke still refused to act. The delay had terrible consequences: "When the enemy had formed their arrays, the troops of Song launched their attack but were defeated. The Duke of Song suffered an injury in his leg, and all his guards were killed." When his countrymen blamed the Duke for the disaster, he defended his decision by portraying himself as a morally superior man. "A gentleman would never hurt twice already wounded soldiers and never imprison white-haired men. The ancients

would never take advantage of treacherous terrains in war," says the Duke. "I would never give order to beat the drum of war before the other side has arrayed their troops."[21] This response may tell us how important it was to follow certain protocols of moral conduct in the remote past of Chinese antiquity, but Duke Xiang's seemingly misplaced adherence to the principles of fairness and moral behavior made him a laughingstock in history. Chairman Mao Zedong, for example, absolutely despised him and called him a stupid pig. "We are not Duke Xiang of Song," says Mao; "we don't want his asinine piggish morality."[22]

In a battle of war, "shoot first, think later" may very well be the right thing to do, because fighting well and winning are all that matters, while moral principles and ethical considerations should be put aside. Or should they? If war becomes its own justification, in which the end legitimates the means, then, what could be the ground for any action against unjust wars and random killing, and on what ground could we legitimize peace? In presenting a moral argument about just and unjust wars, Michael Walzer refers to Mao's critique of the Duke of Song and argues that it is by no means certain that military action should always take precedence over moral principles. "We cannot forget that the rights violated for the sake of victory are genuine rights, deeply founded and in principle inviolable," says Walzer. "And there is nothing asinine about this principle: the very lives of men and women are at stake. So the theory of war, when it is fully understood, poses a dilemma, which every theorist (though not, fortunately, every soldier) must resolve as best he can. And no resolution is serious unless it recognizes the force of both *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello.*"[23] War may very well be an extreme case, but the dilemma it poses regarding the conflict between moral principles and military action is just one specific case of a general problem, one example of the dilemma between thinking and action, or interpretation and its rivals.

In a different way, the same impatience with excessive thinking and interpretation finds a hilariously funny expression in a comic episode in Monty Python's Flying Circus, the "Philosophers International Football Match." In that episode, German and Greek philosophers form two teams for a football match in the Olympic Stadium in Munich, interestingly with the Chinese sage Confucius as referee and St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas as linesmen. Led by Hegel, the German team includes Kant, Schelling, Schopenhauer, Wittgenstein, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, among others, with Leibniz as goalkeeper. On the Greek side, Socrates is the captain and the other players include Archimedes, Heraclitus, Aristotle, Empedocles, Plotinus, etc., with Plato as goalkeeper. Confucius blows the whistle and the game begins. Instead of the kickoff, however,

players on both sides start their philosophers' walk, sinking deep into contemplation, occasionally waving their hands in the air or talking to themselves, looking upwards to the sky or downwards at the ground, all deep in thinking and interpreting, but with nobody touching the ball on the center spot. This goes on for quite a while, and after the first half of the match, John Cleese as television announcer reports that there is still "no score." The voiceover of Michael Palin tells us that, though there may be no score, suddenly "there's no lack of excitement here," as we see Confucius pulling out a yellow card on Nietzsche, who has just been booked for arguing with the referee and accusing Confucius of having no free will. Then Martin Luther, as manager of the German team, decides to replace Wittgenstein, who is doing absolutely nothing, with Karl Marx. We see Marx running up and down to warm up, and the voiceover comments on the potential significance of this move: "Let's see whether we can put some life into the German attack," but we are told immediately after: "Evidently not. What a shame!" as Marx starts to walk slowly like everybody else. Then, just over one minute left before the end of the game, Archimedes suddenly cries out: "Eureka!" He kicks the ball to Socrates, who finally puts the ball into the German goal with a diving header and secures the Greek victory. The Germans, however, are still disputing the call: "Hegel is arguing that the reality is merely an *a priori* adjunct of non-naturalistic ethics, Kant via the categorical imperative is holding that ontologically it exists only in the imagination, and Marx is claiming it was offside."[24] The German philosophers, in other words, still prefer thinking to action, and deem reality a mere mental construct, a matter of interpretation.

If we take this comic sketch seriously—and I think we should—we may say that it is not fortuitous that only three philosophers here are related to action: Archimedes, Socrates, and Confucius. According to a well-known anecdote, Archimedes discovered the law of fluid mechanics by stepping into bath water, that is, by a physical action. Socrates and Confucius, to quote Sir William Temple, are comparable in using "the same design of reclaiming men from the useless and endless speculations of nature, to those of morality."[25] Writing in 1690, Temple was a pioneer in bringing Socrates and Confucius together as important thinkers who changed the course of philosophy from "useless and endless speculations" to the ethical and political concerns of the real world, the world of physical reality and meaningful action. Temple's remark may demonstrate an English predilection for empiricism, while Monty Python's comic sketch may be seen as a typical English critique of German idealism. What we have here is the discontent with thinking as interpretation, or the call for action as more meaningful and effective.

On the other hand, Heinrich Heine's story about an English inventor and his creation of a perfect automaton may be seen as a typical German response to English utilitarianism. According to Heine, an inventor made a perfect machine that resembled a human being in every respect, even having "within its leathern breast a sort of human feeling differing not too greatly from the usual feelings of the English."[26] The only thing this automaton does not have is a soul, "and the poor creature, aware of its deficiency, tormented its creator day and night with the plea to give it a soul." The story is certainly satirical of the English for creating a physical body without a soul, but the German poet is fully aware of the even greater danger of having a soul without a body. "It is far more dreadful, terrifying, uncanny," Heine goes on to say, "when we have created a soul and it demands from us its body and pursues us with this demand." Thinking is the soul, and our thought leaves us no peace until it is given a physical body and fully materialized in reality. "Thought strives to become action," says Heine, "the word to become flesh."[27] In Heine's Platonic understanding, action is nothing but the realization of thoughts and ideas, and it may be a tragic process of pain and terror when ideas require destructive forces to achieve materialization. With his characteristic poetic panache, Heine writes:

> Take note of this, you proud men of action. You are nothing but unconscious handymen for the men of thought who, often in the humblest quiet, have prescribed with the utmost precision all your actions. Maximilian Robespierre was nothing but the hand of Jean Jacques Rousseau, the bloody hand that drew forth from the womb of time the body whose soul Rousseau had created. Did not, perhaps, the restless anxiety that embittered the life of Jean Jacques stem from a premonition in his spirit as to what sort of accoucheur his thoughts would need in order to enter the world in corporal form?[28]

In this brilliant poetic depiction, Heine puts thinking above action in an analogy of soul and body, or mind and hand. When he speaks of Immanuel Kant and the power of his ideas, he again writes dramatically: "If the citizens of Königsberg had had any premonition of the full significance of his ideas, they would have felt a far more terrifying dread at the presence of this man than at the sight of an executioner, an executioner who merely executes people. But the good folk saw in him nothing but a professor of philosophy."[29] This is perhaps a typical German understanding of the relationship between thinking and action, interpretation and practice, with an emphasis on the potential force of thinking to effectively change the world when ideas are actualized in a corporal form. If so, it is then difficult to reprimand German thinkers for lack of a sense of reality and physical action. And yet, it is important

to maintain the distinction between thinking and action, interpretation and practice, what is essentially a mental act and what is the material force in reality.

As a radical thinker, Karl Marx proves to be a quite different figure from the ineffectual philosopher depicted in Monty Python's comic sketch. In his *Theses on Feuerbach*, he famously declares the absolute precedence of action over interpretation: "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it."[30] Here he seems to have consciously broken away from the philosophical tradition, and in this sense, as Terry Eagleton remarks, "Marx was more of an antiphilosopher than a philosopher."[31] Understanding the relationship between interpretation and practice from a purely materialistic position and regarding thought as "a material force in its own right," Eagleton wonders whether Marx has set up too rigid a dichotomy between interpretation and action.[32] Thus he cautions that "one must take Marx's celebrated eleventh thesis on Feuerbach with a pinch of salt," because "how could you change the world without interpreting it? And isn't the power to interpret it in a particular light the beginnings of political change?"[33] But Marx was not advocating action without thinking and interpretation, and one may say that it is precisely Marxism as an interpretation of the capitalist mode of production and the necessity of a socialist revolution that has changed the world in fundamental ways. "No thinker has ever lived up more successfully to his own injunction," says Eric Hobsbawm. Mainly through Lenin and the Russian Revolution, Marx's ideas "became the quintessential international doctrine of twentieth-century social revolution, equally welcome as such from China to Peru."[34] Marx himself spoke of thinking and interpretation in terms of practice or practical consequences and fully acknowledged the material force of theory.

As a materialist philosopher, however, Marx did maintain the difference between interpretation and action, language and reality. "The weapon of criticism certainly cannot replace the criticism of weapons; material force must be overthrown by material force," says Marx; "but theory, too, becomes a material force once it seizes the masses."[35] Obviously Marx did not believe in anything like the magic of speech acts or "performative utterances," because the material world is not to be changed by mere verbal critique. At the same time, he also fully acknowledged, just like Heine had done before, that ideas, theory, thinking and interpretation could become material forces once they "seize the masses," that is, become actualized through human agency. Marx formulated a philosophy of revolutionary action and redefined thinking and truth in terms of their outcome in reality. He claims that "whether objective [*gegenständliche*]

truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a *practical* question. In practice man must prove the truth, that is, the reality and power, the this-sidedness [*Diesseitigkeit*] of his thinking. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which is isolated from practice is a purely *scholastic* question."[36] This sounds so much like the English proverb—"the proof of the pudding is in the eating"—that the opposition between English and German philosophical dispositions, and also between interpretation and action, collapses as a false dichotomy. Here Marx reaffirms, as Tom Rockmore observes, "that his is an activist philosophy committed to altering the status quo in the direction of the freedom of the men and women of the world oppressed by liberal capitalism."[37] In the nineteenth century, and particularly in the twentieth, Marxism became not only a radical theory, but a socialist movement and political reality that literally changed the world.

Using Marx's own idea of measuring the truth claim of a theory by its outcome in reality, however, one must admit that the evidence does not stand in Marxism's favor. Mentioning very different affiliations with Marx and Marxism, "differences between, say, Zionist *kibbutzim* and Pol Pot's Kampuchea, between Hilferding and Mao, between Stalin and Gramsci, Rosa Luxemburg and Kim Il-sung," Hobsbawm tries to dissociate Marx's ideas from the political regimes affiliated with Marxism, and to emphasize the transformation of Marx's theory in political reality. To separate Marx's ideas from political actions that had negative or even disastrous consequences, it is necessary to emphasize the distinction between thinking or interpretation and action in political reality. "Interpreting the world and changing the world, however organically linked," Hobsbawm insists, "are not the same thing."[38] If political realities in the twentieth century may offer anything like historical lessons, especially those realities enacted in the name of Marxism in the former Soviet Union and the other socialist countries, one has to acknowledge that the Marxist "activist philosophy committed to altering the status quo" has not advanced in the direction of liberating men and women of the world. On the contrary, it has moved in the opposite direction of ideological control, political repression, and the often touted "dictatorship of the proletariat." The way Marxist theory seized the masses and altered the status quo reminds us of what Heine said about the French revolution—but a revolution without the French concept of *liberté*—where Robespierre acted as the bloody hand that executed what Rousseau had created in the mind. From Stalin and Mao to Pol Pot and Kim Il-sung and his son and grandson as supreme rulers of North Korea, many Communist leaders put in practice, or claimed to, what Marx had envisioned as the potential of a revolutionary theory. The terror of such

practices—the killing fields, the repression of freedom, the persecution of intellectuals, the control of the mind, etc.—ought to give us pause in cheering the success of the material forces generated when the theory of Marxism seized the masses, or more generally, when action to *change* the world took precedence over philosophical thinking to *interpret* the world. Interpretation, the rigorous process of thinking through ideas and anticipating their consequences, proves to be absolutely necessary, despite its seeming slowness, weakness, and inefficiency.

But does interpretation or thinking in depth necessarily lead to inefficiency and paralyze the will to act? That, as many critics have argued, is *the* central question in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as a sophisticated and instructive study of the dilemma of thinking and action. Hamlet's procrastination is the notorious critical crux: Why does he not just kill Claudius when his father's ghost has revealed to him the murder Claudius had committed, and charged him with the task of revenge? Why does he waste so much time reflecting on all sorts of things in philosophical soliloquies instead of engaging in decisive action? "All Hamlet has to do (if indeed he ought to do it) is chop down Claudius," as Harold Bloom puts it, but Bloom goes on to suggest that this reaction is too simple or too crude for the Prince of Denmark. "Avenging the father does not require a Hamlet; a Fortinbras would be more than sufficient."[39] Numerous answers have been offered to the question of Hamlet's procrastination. Hamlet, says William Hazlitt, "seems incapable of deliberate action, and is only hurried into extremities on the spur of the occasion, when he has no time to reflect."[40] Hazlitt may represent the view that Hamlet's problem resulted from his predilection for thinking rather than action. "His ruling passion is to think, not to act: and any vague pretext that flatters this propensity instantly diverts him from his previous purposes."[41] But there are other, almost opposite, views. A. C. Bradley, for example, insists that the idea that "speculative thinking" necessarily leads to Hamlet's irresolution "is really a mere illusion."[42] Hamlet is not your average philosopher, for "he is the favourite of the people, who are not given to worship philosophers."[43] That is, of course, a very good point made by Bradley against Samuel Taylor Coleridge's interpretation of Hamlet as a thinker rather than a soldier. Bradley lists a number of "quick and impetuous" actions taken by Hamlet—"rushing after the Ghost, killing Polonius, dealing with the King's commission on the ship, boarding the pirate, leaping into the grave, executing his final vengeance"—and sneers: "Imagine Coleridge doing any of these things!"[44]

Thus we have two very different views of Hamlet, one seeing him as leaning towards thinking, and the other towards action, while Hamlet as a complicated and enigmatic figure contains both, giving evidence

to sustain claims to such diverse characterizations. Hamlet is certainly capable of quick actions, but without the many famous soliloquies in which he speaks of his deepest thoughts, *Hamlet* the play would not hold the same degree of fascination for us, even though at the same time, the many sudden turns of events and impetuous actions continuously amaze us and push the movement of the play towards its inevitable end. To put it plainly, it is Hamlet's thinking and interpretation that make the play what it is, and it is pointless to deny that too much thinking has resulted in Hamlet's lack of action. In fact, Hamlet himself does not like his delay in action any less than his critics, and he confesses to having this problem many times in the play. When his father's ghost first called upon him to "Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder" (I.v.25), he promised to act immediately, "with wings as swift / As meditation or the thoughts of love" (II.v.29). The fact is, however, that he does not act immediately, and he is tormented by his own awareness of his inaction. Having seen an actor emotionally involved in the story of an imaginary tragedy ("What's Hecuba to him, or he to her, / That he should weep for her?" [II.ii.553]), Hamlet feels ashamed and reproaches himself for doing nothing. "O what a rogue and peasant slave am I!" (II.ii.544), he cries out, and he calls himself "A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak / Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause, / And can say nothing" (II.ii.562). He is constantly comparing himself with others who are more active than pensive, showing that he is fully aware of his problem of delay and inaction.

As in Shakespeare's other plays, a subplot complements or contrasts with the main plot, so Hamlet's task to avenge his father has its double in Laertes seeking revenge for the death of his father Polonius, whom Hamlet mistook for Claudius and killed in the Queen's chamber. Hamlet is deeply engaged in thinking about life and death, the mystery of what might happen after death, and in his most well-known soliloquy, he makes it clear that it is doubts and uncertainty about the world after death that make action difficult, if not impossible:

> Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
> And thus the native hue of resolution
> Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
> And enterprises of great pitch and moment
> With this regard their currents turn awry
> And lose the name of action. (III.i.83)

In contrast, Laertes gives no soliloquies and harbors no doubts. As soon as he learns about his father's death, he rushes to the king and cries out: "Let come what comes, only I'll be reveng'd / Most throughly

for my father!" (IV.v.135). If Hamlet thinks too deeply so as to lose the moment of direct action, Laertes rushes to action without much thinking. The tragedy *Hamlet* shows us is the dilemma of thinking and action, and it does not offer an easy solution. It is difficult to imagine, however, that anyone would prefer Laertes to Hamlet, for Laertes shows us the danger of hastily rushing to action without thinking, the trap of becoming an organ of the device of malice and deception, a bloody hand that executes someone else's devious plot. Hamlet, even though taking action belatedly and paying the price with his own life, becomes our beloved figure with all his reflections, doubts, hesitations, and his endless anxiety of interpretation.

In Tom Stoppard's play for television, *Professional Foul*, the issues we have discussed seem to coalesce nicely into a wonderful dramatic piece, in which philosophers as thinkers and speakers meet and interact with action-driven footballers in a politically charged environment. The play's central theme or metaphor, a "professional foul," that is, an action taken out of expediency with ambiguous ethical implications, is committed by different characters under different circumstances and with different consequences. The main character is Anderson, a Cambridge don and the J. S. Mill Professor of Ethics, who has been invited to present a paper at "Colloquium Philosophicum Prague 77." He goes to Prague, however, with an "ulterior motive," for he intends "to play truant" from the colloquium to watch a World Cup qualifier football match between England and Czechoslovakia.[45] Talks at a philosophical colloquium and physical rivalry at a football match thus form a contrast between thinking and action, offering stuff for this play's intervention in the issues that concern us here.

Anderson understands ethics as a sort of contract between free-will-owning individuals or communities, so when Hollar, his former student from Prague, asks him to smuggle his PhD dissertation out of the country, he feels hesitant. Believing he has freely entered into a contract with the Czechoslovakian government by accepting the invitation to the Colloquium, he feels that, as he puts it, "having accepted their hospitality I cannot in all conscience start smuggling . . . It's just not ethical."[46] But the social structure of Communist Czechoslovakia at the time is not the kind of social contract that Anderson imagines, and Hollar, a Cambridge-educated scholar reduced to being a cleaner of lavatories in a bus station, did not enter into this contract freely. He has become a dissident, and his dissertation arguing for individual rights against state control would certainly be taken as an offence against the state. When Anderson goes to Hollar's flat to return the dissertation, he learns that Hollar has been arrested. Anderson is himself prevented from leaving

the flat by the plainclothes police, but is allowed to listen to a radio broadcast of the football match he now cannot attend. Thus Anderson becomes an involuntary witness to the police search of Hollar's apartment. He hears on the radio that the English footballer Broadbent has committed a professional foul, but the Czechoslovakian team scores with a penalty kick. Ironically, Broadbent's act finds its double in the apartment, where a police officer commits *his* "professional foul" by planting some American dollars in Hollar's residence as incriminating evidence so as to charge him for "currency offenses."

Having witnessed such injustice and cruelty, Anderson changes his conference presentation from his earlier accepted paper on "ethical fiction" to a new talk on "the conflict between the rights of individuals and the rights of the community." In his paper, he tries to show "that rules, in so far as they are related to rights, are a secondary and consequential elaboration of primary rights," where one should be "associating rules generally with communities and rights generally with individuals."[47] He talks about an individual's rights as universally accepted both by people who believe in God and those who believe in what is naturally fair and sensible, by the American Constitution as well as by the Constitution of Czechoslovakia, and that such universally accepted rights and values have serious implications "for a collective or state ethic which finds itself in conflict with individual rights, and seeks, in the name of the people, to impose its values on the very individuals who comprise the state. The illogic of this manoeuvre is an embarrassment to totalitarian systems."[48] Anderson thus changes his presentation into a political condemnation of the Czech regime's suppression of freedom and human rights. That is surely a political intervention, an action, but one based on his interpretation of the situation and of what he has experienced in Prague.

It is interesting to note that in his politically engaged speech, Anderson offers a critique of the relativistic or nihilistic tendency of much contemporary theory, particularly the so-called linguistic turn that sees everything as a linguistic construct or utterance, a pure abstraction separated from reality. "In our own time linguistic philosophy proposes that the notion of, say, justice has no existence outside the ways in which we choose to employ the word, and indeed *consists* only of the way in which we employ it," says Anderson. But justice or injustice are not just words; they are what an individual experiences in life, in cases when they "put someone in prison for reading or writing the wrong books." As a philosopher, Anderson finally establishes an ethical theory on the basis of lived experience as real, thus breaking away from the rigid opposition between thinking and action, theory and practice. "There is a sense of right and wrong which precedes utterance," he says. "It is individually

experienced and it concerns one person's dealings with another person. From this experience we have built a system of ethics which is the sum of individual acts of recognition of individual right."[49]

Of course, *Professional Foul* is a drama, not a scholarly essay, and Anderson is a fictional character created by the playwright, not a real academic proposing a theory of ethics. Stoppard, however, who was born in Czechoslovakia and grew up in England, is politically committed, and his plays frequently engage such themes as human rights, censorship, and political freedom, as well as discussions of philosophy and other intellectual issues. *Professional Foul* was dedicated to Václav Havel, and the play's political engagement and emphasis on action against empty talk certainly has a historical background in political reality. Anderson's speech at the colloquium becomes a form of powerful action, like the footballer's physical activity in the match, but that action is the result of careful thinking, interpretation, and planning. Insofar as Anderson changes his speech from an earlier paper accepted by his hosts, his presentation constitutes a "professional foul" in the context of the colloquium organization under the tight control of Communist ideology. At the airport upon their return, the luggage of Anderson and a fellow philosopher Chetwyn is thoroughly searched, but another philosopher McKendrick gets through the security check rather quickly without any trouble. The police find nothing on Anderson and have to let him go, while Chetwyn is detained for carrying some letters written by Czech dissidents to the Amnesty International or the United Nations. Finally as the plane is taking off, Anderson reveals that he has put Hollar's dissertation in McKendrick's briefcase, for he has anticipated that he would be searched, but not McKendrick. That certainly constitutes yet another "professional foul," and to pacify an angry McKendrick, Anderson drily remarks: "Ethics is a very complicated business. That's why they have these congresses."[50]

Ethics is indeed complicated, as it is both a matter of thinking about what it is to be ethical, and also taking ethical actions in good conscience against such evils as injustice and repression. Foul play is surely unethical, but under certain circumstances, a "professional foul" may be necessary, and an act like smuggling a dissident paper out of a tightly controlled police state, putting the paper in a fellow traveler's briefcase without the other party's consent or even prior knowledge, can be seen in a larger context as ethical and justifiable. The appreciation of that complexity is instructive when we reexamine the dilemma of thinking and action, interpretation and practice. On the one hand, as we have seen, it is important to retain a distinction between thinking and action, which are not synonymous, as contemporary theorists have sometimes assumed.

Yet on the other, this distinction is not a dichotomy and any rigid opposition between interpretation and its rivals is ultimately invalid and unnecessary. What is wrong with the theoretical confusion of thinking with reality is not the opposition between interpretation and its rivals; it is rather theory's solipsistic obsession with its own discourse. Action is impossible without prior thinking, and practice involves the execution of what has been thought out and interpreted in anticipation.

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NOTES

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50 Stoppard, *The Television Plays*, 185.